

The Heritage of Imperial Aramaic in Eastern Aramaic

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Abstract

Based on certain linguistic features, the varieties of Aramaic attested after the Persian period are usually divided into a Western and an Eastern branch. It is, however, less easy to pinpoint the origin of these two branches, since already the first textual witnesses of Aramaic exhibit a considerable amount of variation. This paper attempts to reconsider some traits often associated with Eastern Aramaic (less clearly defined than its Western counterpart) from a diachronic point of view and relates them to the distinctive features of Imperial Aramaic. Whereas some of them clearly antedate the fall of the Persian Empire, many others reflect later developments.

Keywords

Imperial/Official Aramaic; Eastern Aramaic; Aramaic dialectology; linguistic classification; historical-comparative grammar of Aramaic

Semitic Philology currently witnesses an ever-growing interest in classification. The comparative side of the discipline thereby keeps pace with the discovery of new and the refined analysis of known source material, both of which have challenged a number of well-established ideas during the last few decades. Consequently, they lead to modified diagrams, or ‘family-trees’, assigning each language its respective position in relationship to its sister-idioms. For the time being, the idea of a ‘Central Semitic’ group, which consists of Canaanite and Aramaic, Arabic, and at least of one of the Epigraphic South Arabian languages, Sabaic, has been accepted by many scholars.¹ It is only fair to say

¹ Cf. J. Huehnergard, ‘Features of Central Semitic’, in A. Gianto (ed.), *Biblical and Oriental Essays in Memory of William L. Moran* (BibOr 48; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 2005), pp. 155–203, for a recent survey.

that the opponents of this theory² have not yet marshalled their arguments with a remotely comparable rigour and logic as its supporters. On top of that, some more recent work successfully identified a number of characteristic features which distinguish West Semitic, the ancestor of Central Semitic, from East Semitic, whose chief representative is Akkadian.³ The situation seems straightforward, so why not proceed like this in the same way?

When one moves along the diagram from abstract to concrete, however, even basic issues of linguistic relatedness remain controversial. In a certain sense, linguistic classification turns out to be similar to Euclidean geometry: pure forms like circles, triangles, squares and so forth only exist in our imagination—and perhaps also in the realm of Ideas—whereas the geometry of nature is always fractal. Nonetheless, Euclidean geometry proves essential for many practical purposes, like building a bridge, as does classification for current techniques of Historical Linguistics which seek to trace the origin and development of a certain morpheme within ‘Northwest Semitic’, ‘Central Semitic’ and so on. But the material does not always easily fit this framework. Issues of classification currently debated with reference to historical stages of Semitic concern first and foremost the subgrouping of Aramaic, the origin of the Arabic vernaculars and their relationship with older forms of Arabian, and, to a certain extent, the earliest varieties of Akkadian. Because of its attested period of some three thousand years, the vast geographical area it covers, and the enormous cultural as well as literary diversity it reflects, Aramaic poses a particular challenge.

By means of a case-study, the present paper endeavours to explore ways in which different approaches to the internal classification of Aramaic can be integrated into a more ‘holistic’ methodology. Perhaps such a goal reinforces the idea that Historical Linguistics at the same time reflects a good deal of cultural history. From one particular angle, linguistic evidence throws light on the formative period of a current, otherwise almost intangible, which eventually led to so important corpora like Syriac literature, the Babylonian Talmud, and the canonical compositions of the Mandaeans. Although the literary traditions just mentioned occupy a central place in three different religions, each of

² See, e.g., F. Corriente, ‘Lexicostatistics and the Central Semitic Theory’, in G. del Olmo Lete *et al.* (eds.), *Šapal tibnim mû illakû: Studies Presented to Joaquín Sanmartín on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (AUS, 22; Barcelona: AUSA, 2006), pp. 139–144.

³ J. Huehnergard, ‘Proto-Semitic and Proto-Akkadian’, in G. Deutscher and N.J.C. Kouwenberg (eds.), *The Akkadian Language in its Semitic Context* (PIHANS, 106; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2006), pp. 1–18.

them surviving up to this day, the respective languages, or dialects, are all commonly subsumed under the term ‘Eastern Aramaic’—a current, as it will appear, with a long and intriguing history. It has even been connected with the crucial concept of Imperial Aramaic in scholarly literature, thereby determining important aspects of the internal subclassification of Aramaic as such. Hence, an enquiry into its genesis, critically reviewing some older proposals, seems a worthwhile enterprise. In order to understand what Eastern Aramaic is and where it comes from, some more preliminary steps are necessary.

First of all, the ‘family-tree’ model, according to which new languages arise out of common ancestors in whose innovative features they partake, makes it possible to speak of Semitic as a linguistic branch and indeed of Aramaic as opposed to other members of the same ‘family’. Due to constant change, however, there are but few structural parameters of phonology, morphology, and lexicon shared by all Semitic languages, or by all forms of Aramaic: many characteristic traits only come into being in the course of time, and in a purely descriptive sense, not much more than the typical forms of the words for ‘one’ (*ḥd*) and ‘son’ (*br*) are attested in the earliest witnesses of Aramaic.⁴ Consequently, the idea of genetic relatedness provides a very practical and rational criterion for classification according to the relative chronology of historical changes. However different several languages may look when compared individually, they share common ancestors with their respective identifiable features which may be either retentions from a yet older stage or innovations.

Since linguistic innovations spread unevenly across areas in which particular varieties are used and influence each other, normally from a centre to its periphery, a spatial notion has to supplement the linear, purely chronological one.⁵ In this sense, some features do not extend beyond certain regions whose boundaries can be plotted on a map, whereas others spread universally except for perhaps the utmost periphery. The latter approach, dialect geography, is no less historically relevant than the genealogical model and allows one to identify, for example, Eastern and Western forms of Aramaic. They can be put into a diachronic perspective eventually leading to dialect history investigating the origins of certain dialect groups and the ways in which they intersect. For this reason, the idea of a dialect continuum is now a firm part of many

⁴ Cf. J. Huehnergard, ‘What is Aramaic?’, *ARAM* 7 (1995), pp. 265–286.

⁵ See A. Gianto, ‘Lost and Found in the Grammar of First-Millennium Aramaic’, in H. Gzella and M.L. Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), pp. 11–25, especially pp. 12–13.

comparative studies of Aramaic, and rightly so.⁶ Language change, to be sure, does not happen as a miraculous automatism, but takes place by means of interacting individuals moving from one place to another and their personal networks. Therefore social factors such as linguistic prestige, higher and lower registers (that is, language varieties according to use or situation), standard and substandard, imperfect learning and so forth also have to be taken into account, together with institutions like scribal schools or networks of royal chancelleries. They can help identify the driving forces behind both particular retentions as well as innovations and the discontinuous spread of features across entire areas in language history.⁷ Either way, language contact appears as an important motor for change.

The various models proposed for arranging the bewildering plethora of Aramaic dialects or languages (the difference between a dialect and a language is more often than not based on non-linguistic criteria) into a coherent picture reflect these different methodologies, though not always consciously: Old, Middle, and Late Aramaic, for example, refer to chronological stages; Eastern and Western Aramaic, by contrast, are obviously geographical classifications; and Imperial Aramaic, or *Reichsaramäisch* (J. Markwart), like the more elusive Universal Aramaic (H.L. Ginsberg) or Standard Literary Aramaic (J.C. Greenfield), is a social category rather than a chronological or a geographical one. Even though it occupies a position between Old Aramaic and Middle Aramaic in J. Fitzmyer's widespread scheme,⁸ an imperial language enforced by an authority like a royal chancellery and its local branches by definition provides a supraregional standard which at the same time is bound to resist historical developments more effectively than spoken dialects. It must be noted, though, that the existence of a *koiné* or other socially-conditioned

⁶ So explicitly in the early systematic treatment by D. Boyarin, 'An Inquiry into the Formation of the Middle Aramaic Dialects', in Y.L. Arbeitman and A.R. Bomhard (eds.), *Bono Homini Donum: Essays in Historical Linguistics in Memory of J. Alexander Kerns* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1981), vol. II, pp. 613–649. The idea of an Aramaic dialect continuum is also underlying K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 23–71.

⁷ Cf. R.A. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1996), pp. 20–69.

⁸ In its most recent form succinctly summarized in J. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1Q20: A Commentary* (BibOr, 18/B; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 3rd ed. 2004), pp. 30–32.

varieties does not exclude a coexisting multitude of diverse dialects; both are geared towards different communicative purposes.⁹ Hence, speaking about, for example, Old Aramaic and Imperial Aramaic on the one hand, or Middle Aramaic and Eastern Aramaic on the other, presupposes a number of different conceptual frameworks. Unfortunately, this distinction is not always observed.

In Pre-Islamic times, most forms of Aramaic were used under political circumstances that favoured cultural exchange and at the same time promoted universal standards in legal or administrative matters, such as the Persian Empire, the rise of Hellenism after Alexander the Great and the dynasties of his successors, or the Roman conquest. Hence, they exhibit a significant amount of mutual interaction, both vertically and horizontally, from the Achaemenid period at the very latest. Such a ‘vertical’ interaction between Imperial Aramaic as an international *lingua franca* and various local dialects seems to have influenced in particular the shape of the Eastern Aramaic languages over time, as did a more ‘horizontal’ kind of interference between spoken forms of Aramaic across different regions. How did that work exactly?

Until about half a century ago, it was widely believed that, in accordance with the dominant genealogical model in Linguistics, both the Eastern and the Western branch of Aramaic attested from Roman times onwards emerged directly from the same predecessor, since they bear some characteristic traits presumably inherited. This predecessor was identified with Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic (now often called ‘Official Aramaic’),¹⁰ the chancery language of the Persian Empire from the fifth century B.C. until its fall at the hands of Alexander the Macedonian.¹¹ Recent discoveries of additional primary material and refined linguistic research have since then pointed out the weaknesses of such a view. First of all, there is now growing agreement that Aramaic was diversified right from the beginning of its attestation

⁹ Hence Boyarin’s denial of the possibility of an Aramaic *koiné* as a factor determining the formation of the Aramaic dialects (Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’) does not fully acknowledge the fact that a supraregional, written, standard idiom and actual spoken languages cannot be compared according to the same criteria.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Gzella, ‘Imperial Aramaic’, forthcoming in M.P. Streck and S. Weninger (eds.), *Semitic Languages: An International Handbook* (HSK; Berlin: De Gruyter), for a grammatical sketch of that language, together with a brief remark on terminological problems, and the overview over the textual corpus in *idem*, *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen* (VOK 48; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), pp. 35–56.

¹¹ Cf. F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung seit Th. Nöldekes Veröffentlichungen* (Leiden: Brill, 1939), pp. 55–71, 104–105, and still in *idem*, ‘Aramaic Studies During the Past Thirty Years’, *JNES* 37 (1978), pp. 81–91, here p. 85.

some time in the ninth century B.C. Already the oldest textual witness, the Gozan inscription, contains a number of orthographical and morphological phenomena unknown from the mainstream of the Old Aramaic material, not to mention the classificatory problems around Samʿalian, the idiom used for royal inscriptions by a local dynasty in south-central Turkey during the first few centuries of the first millennium B.C. This situation seems to mirror the diversity of circumstances under which the many individual Aramaic city-states emerged at the turn from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age.¹² Secondly, there can be little doubt that different forms of Aramaic had spread to Egypt in the West (as evidenced by the Hermopolis Papyri)¹³ and to Lake Urmia in the East (which becomes clear from the Bukan-inscription)¹⁴ even before the rise of the Persian Empire.¹⁵ So the Achaemenid chancellery language was not the only Aramaic idiom current at that time. Thirdly, this latter point is further corroborated by a certain amount of variation in the corpus of Achaemenid Aramaic texts which makes it quite plain that the official standard in spelling and phraseology was not met everywhere to the same extent. The aspired norm, then, should be distinguished from its actual realizations in the texts themselves.

Since Official Aramaic was thus in all likelihood only one of many coexisting forms of Aramaic when the Achaemenids rose to power, though operating on a different level than the spoken vernaculars and thus arguably being the most influential form, it has to be defined precisely in order to make a distinction from Eastern Aramaic and indeed from other varieties meaningful. Since it appears not to be a ‘dialect’ in the strict sense, nor subject to any further dialectal diversification on geographical grounds, one should not speak of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ or ‘Egyptian’ forms of Official Aramaic, as

¹² Cf. now the synopsis by K. Lawson Younger Jr., ‘The Late Bronze Age / Iron Age Transition and the Origins of the Arameans’, in *idem* (ed.), *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), pp. 131–174.

¹³ See V. Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik der Texte des 7. und 6. Jh.s v. Chr.* (Heidelberger Studien zum Alten Orient, 4; Heidelberg: Heidelberg Orientverlag, 1993), pp. 35–41.

¹⁴ Edited by M. Sokoloff, ‘The Old Aramaic Inscription from Bukān: A Revised Interpretation’, *IEJ* 49 (1999), pp. 105–115.

¹⁵ See W. Röllig, ‘Keilschrift versus Alphabetschrift’, in P. Bienkowski *et al.* (eds.), *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society. Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 426; New York and London: T & T Clark International, 2005), pp. 119–126; A.R. Millard, ‘Early Aramaic’ in J.N. Postgate (ed.), *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), pp. 85–94.

is sometimes the case,¹⁶ but rather of a standard and various non-standard features colouring the actual application of that standard. In the light of more recent sociolinguistic research, such non-standard phenomena would be conditioned by a variety of reasons, geographical and social alike. Syntax, above all word order, as well as lexicon and phraseology, are of course especially susceptible to contact-induced change.¹⁷ The approach suggested here might better account for this tendency and also avoid the otherwise fatal problem of a strictly centralized administration working with different linguistic standards for different regions.

Nonetheless, the position of Official Aramaic within the wider history of Aramaic and its provenance can be assessed. According to methods well-established in dialectology, linguistic classification must rest on features which are both distinctive and statistically significant, as opposed to either common developments which could easily arise independently due to a certain predisposition in the language structure¹⁸ or just marginal phenomena which are not in any way representative. The amount of Aramaic material surviving from earlier periods sets clear limits to this enterprise. Yet some distinctive traits of Official Aramaic do occur frequently enough in order to make comparisons along the above-mentioned lines meaningful. Although Aramaic spread across the Ancient Near East from the eighth century B.C. onwards and became an imperial language in Neo-Assyrian times, the language of the Achaemenid period differs significantly from the highly heterogeneous seventh and sixth century witnesses. Hence, the term ‘Official Aramaic’ exclusively refers to the Achaemenid standard language here. A number of linguistic features which affect, with varying degrees of certainty, orthography, phonology, morphology, and syntax have reasonably been judged as diagnostic for this variety:

1. The most important criterion is the widespread spelling of the nasal /n/ in Official Aramaic even in cases where it would be expected to assimilate to an

¹⁶ See, e.g., Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’, following E.Y. Kutscher, ‘Aramaic’, in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Current Trends in Linguistics* 6 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 347–412, here p. 362, and J.C. Greenfield, ‘The Dialects of Early Aramaic’, *JNES* 37 (1978), pp. 93–99.

¹⁷ For the same reason, it is understandable that Kutscher’s list of traits characteristic of an ‘Eastern type of Official Aramaic’ (‘Aramaic’, p. 362) does not include a single feature of phonology or morphology.

¹⁸ Some of these instances of linguistic ‘drift’ within Semitic have been outlined by Joshua Blau in various publications, see, e.g., ‘Some Difficulties in the Reconstruction of “Proto-Hebrew” and “Proto-Canaanite”’, in M. Black and G. Fohrer (eds.), *In Memoriam Paul Kahle* (BZAW, 103; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1968), pp. 29–43, especially pp. 36–38.

immediately following consonant. So instead of the regular form */yattēn/ or */yettēn/ (the colour of the preformative vowel of the ‘imperfect’ is not quite clear for this period)¹⁹ ‘he will give’, from the root *ntn*, one very often finds /yantēn/ or /yētēn/.²⁰ Such an /n/ is hardly ever spelled in Aramaic before the Persian period, during which it also encroaches on older varieties coming into contact with Official Aramaic,²¹ and disappears gradually after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire when the influence of the Persian chancellery gradually disappears. Hence, it must be considered a characteristic trait of Official Aramaic with immediate chronological relevance. The controversial question whether this feature is only a matter of historical orthography indicating gemination by means of graphic analogy, as many scholars believe,²² or whether it actually reflects a phonetic reality (that is, the /n/ was in some way pronounced or at least indicates that the following consonant was nasalized), does not affect its diagnostic status.

2. Furthermore, Official Aramaic has a few instances of an apparently innovative active construction where the verb is expressed with a passive participle and the subject with a preposition, hence *qtīl lī* ‘it has been killed by me’ meaning ‘I have killed’. Nothing similar is known from earlier varieties of Aramaic. Old Persian, however, has an exact parallel in order to compensate for the loss of the old Indo-European present perfect with resultative function which had dropped out there. Interestingly, the use of the same construction increases in those Aramaic languages which were continuously

¹⁹ This is due to seemingly conflicting evidence in cuneiform spellings of Aramaic personal names from that period. Cf. the different interpretations of E. Lipiński, ‘Formes verbales dans les noms propres d’Ebla et système verbal sémitique’, in L. Cagni (ed.), *La lingua di Ebla: atti del convegno internazionale (Napoli, 21–23 aprile 1980)* (Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici Series Minor, 14; Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1981), pp. 191–210, here pp. 192–193 (/yi-/), and Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 108–112 (/ya-/).

²⁰ See Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 89–95, and M.L. Folmer, *The Aramaic Language in the Achaemenid Period. A Study in Linguistic Variation* (OLA, 68; Louvain: Peeters, 1995), pp. 74–94.

²¹ In all likelihood, the few occasional spellings of /n/ in such cases in the Hermopolis letters and the Bauer-Meissner papyrus (Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, pp. 31–32) reflect a dissemination of Achaemenid spelling practice. Cf. Gzella, ‘Imperial Aramaic’.

²² This idea is in part based on sporadic spellings like *lhn lh* (Dan 4:3) for the causative stem infinitive of the root ‘ll’ ‘to enter’ besides expected *lh lh* (Dan 5:7), because a nasalization of the velar /l/ (here < */ɣl/, on which cf. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 101–102), as opposed to dental stops, would be very hard to explain on phonetic grounds. For many other examples from ‘ll, see Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 657–658.

subjected to Iranian influence. Most probably, then, it is a calque from Old Persian.²³

3. Another striking hallmark of this Aramaic variety is the disappearance of the Common Semitic third person plural object suffixes attached to verbs. They are well-attested in Old Aramaic, but in the course of time have been replaced by the independent personal pronouns: compare *lmwšrthm*, ‘in order to send them’ (Hermopolis 2:13; Pre-Achaemenid Aramaic) with *l’ ytyt hmw*, ‘I did not bring them’ (TAD A3.3:10; Achaemenid Official Aramaic). Since object suffixes still regularly occur in older Aramaic up to the Hermopolis letters from the late sixth or early fifth century B.C.,²⁴ it seems evident that their loss by and large coincided with the spread of Official Aramaic. Hence, instances of such suffixes in later varieties of Jewish Aramaic and Samaritan Aramaic, whose earlier history is difficult if not impossible to trace, can best be explained as a secondary development²⁵ due to paradigm pressure by the suffixed forms. Even though the change from object suffixes to independent pronouns can thus be dated with a reasonable degree of certainty, it does not have to be restricted to Official Aramaic. Instead, it may simply have been a common development in Aramaic which was more advanced in Official Aramaic when that idiom was promoted to the international standard and therefore spread more quickly together with Persian administration. Nonetheless, this evidence can be used for better pinpointing the origin of the language underlying Official Aramaic (see below) and making a case for its Babylonian origin.
4. Methodological problems due to imperfect attestation arise with the merger of the masculine and the feminine form in the third person plural of the ‘perfect’ conjugation. In Official Aramaic, the masculine form, ending

²³) For a more detailed discussion of the examples, see Gzella, *Tempus*, pp. 184–194; cf. also G. Khan, ‘Aramaic and the Impact of Languages in Contact With it Through the Ages’, in P. Bádenas de la Peña *et al.* (eds.), *Lenguas en Contacto: el testimonio escrito* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2004), pp. 87–108, here pp. 90–95, and M.J. Geller, ‘Persian Influence on Aramaic’, in E. Dąbrowa (ed.) *Ancient Iran and its Neighbours* (Electrum, 10; Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2005), pp. 31–39, here p. 37. Geller interestingly suggests that Persian influence supported the noteworthy expansion of the participle in Aramaic from Achaemenid times onwards.

²⁴) See R. Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik der Inschriften des 10.–8. Jh. v. Chr.* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, XXXVIII/3; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969), p. 80; Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, pp. 20, 59.

²⁵) Cf. T. Muraoka and B. Porten, *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic* (HdO, I/32; Leiden: Brill, 2nd ed. 2003), p. 143, n. 670.

in /-ū/, has been extended to the feminine, perhaps in analogy with the demonstrative pronoun, whereas some later types of Aramaic have a proper feminine ending /-ā/. However, since no third person feminine plural forms of the ‘perfect’ are attested in older corpora,²⁶ the historical significance of this situation remains unclear. Although comparative Semitic evidence clearly points to a distinctive feminine form of the third person plural in the ‘perfect’ and thus marks the extension of the masculine form to the feminine as an innovation,²⁷ it cannot be determined when the development attested by Official Aramaic in fact had occurred.

These features are in general unproblematic. Several scholars also trace the origin of certain characteristic sound changes of Aramaic back to the Persian period. It has been suggested, for instance, that the merger of the Old Aramaic interdentals /ð/ and /θ// with their dental counterparts /d/ and /t/, which had been completed by the time of the appearance of Official Aramaic, triggered the onset of spirantization of plosive consonants in weak articulation. The presence of interdental phonemes, grammarians have argued, would preclude the rise of spirantized allophones with a more or less identical pronunciation.²⁸ However, this is only a *terminus post quem*, and according to others, only Greek transcriptions from 250 B.C. onwards furnish the earliest external evidence for spirantization in Aramaic.²⁹ Moreover, the process of spirantization, during the time when it was operative, affected the whole of Aramaic and therefore cannot be considered a diagnostic feature for determining the linguistic position of Official Aramaic vis-à-vis other Aramaic varieties in any way. Exactly the same limitations apply to the loss of short unstressed vowels in open syllables, a change which was clearly completed only by the second century A.D.³⁰ but whose initial workings have likewise been deduced from Achaemenid material by some Aramaists.³¹ Again, this change, whenever it appeared, was a universal

²⁶ Cf. Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, p. 64; Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, p. 76.

²⁷ As has been correctly remarked by Z. Ben-Hayyim, ‘The Feminine Plural in Early Aramaic’, *Eretz Israel* 1 (1951), pp. 135–139 (Hebrew); cf. Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’, p. 626, and Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 29.

²⁸ S.A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Assyriological Studies, 19; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 117, n. 6; J. Huehnergard, ‘What is Aramaic?’, p. 269, n. 16, provides some additional evidence for sporadic spirantization from mid-eighth century Neo-Babylonian contracts from Nippur. Cf. also Muraoka and Porten, *Grammar*, p. 5.

²⁹ Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 125–128.

³⁰ This is unambiguously demonstrated by the evidence in Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 128–136.

³¹ Notably by S.A. Kaufman, ‘On Vowel Reduction in Aramaic’, *JAOS* 104, pp. 87–95, but

phenomenon which diffused. Since linguistic classification has to be based on innovations, possible retentions from older stages in Official Aramaic will not be discussed here either. These might concern the construct form *brt* /*barat*/ ‘daughter’, as opposed to Eastern Aramaic *bt* (neither of which is sufficiently well-attested to warrant far-reaching conclusions),³² and the infinitive of the derived verbal stems without the prefix /*ma-*/.³³

Excluding doubtful cases, one can positively identify at least the first two of the four features mentioned above, and with some hesitation also the fourth, as characteristic innovations of Official Aramaic or the Aramaic language which was given official status by the Persian administration: the regular spelling of etymological /*n*/ in contact with another consonant and the *qṭīl* *lī*-construction are not attested in any older variety of Aramaic at all. Indirect evidence based on historical-comparative philology also suggests that the extension of the third person masculine plural of the ‘perfect’ conjugation to the feminine is very likely to be an innovation which had come into being by the time Achaemenid Aramaic spread, but it cannot be directly related to this particular form of Aramaic.

Once the above-mentioned features have been identified, they can serve as a point of departure for examining the roots of Official Aramaic and outlining the circumstances under which it took its central position in the linguistic landscape of the first millennium B.C. In this respect, the *qṭīl* *lī*-construction does not take one very far, since it evidently witnesses to Persian influence and hence can only have entered the Aramaic language in a contact situation where Persian was frequently used. In all likelihood, it was borrowed early in the history of the Empire and then spread as a formal or high-register variant together with Achaemenid administration. The roots of two of the other traits,

see the criticism by, among others, J. Huehnergard, Review of Muraoka and Porten, *JAOS* 123 (2002), pp. 604–607, here p. 606.

³² Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 28, 537 (referring to a form *brt* from an eighth-century seal inscription). Note, however, that evidence for *bt* from a few personal names predating the Achaemenid period is not necessarily Aramaic. The material has now been assembled and analyzed by S.E. Fassberg, ‘The Forms of “Son” and “Daughter” in Aramaic’ in Gzella and Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, pp. 41–53.

³³ Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, pp. 28, 150; for a comprehensive discussion of the whole picture, see now S.E. Fassberg, ‘Infinitival forms in Aramaic’, in J.C. Salmons and S. Dubenion-Smith (eds.), *Historical Linguistics 2005: Selected Papers from the 17th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Madison, Wisconsin, 31 July–5 August 2005* (Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, 284; Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), pp. 239–256.

by contrast, may go back further in time and say something about the local variety underlying Official Aramaic before it had been turned into the Persian chancellery language. Many if not most standard idioms, like Attic Greek, Florentine Italian and others, originate from true regional dialects, so there is all reason to assume that the same was the case with Achaemenid Aramaic.³⁴

First and foremost, the custom to regularly spell an etymological /n/, whatever its reflex in pronunciation during the Achaemenid period may have been, strongly points to a Babylonian environment.³⁵ Admittedly, in verbal roots *ln*, the grapheme {n} in the ‘imperfect’ could denote an etymological writing based on ‘perfect’ forms from the same root, where the original /n/ was preserved because it was followed by a vowel, and such writings could in turn easily have influenced ‘imperfect’ forms from verbs *ly* due to analogy. This explanation, however, cannot account for the {n} in the second person independent personal pronouns (e.g., *’nt* instead of Old Aramaic *’t* for /’att/ ‘you’), since no direct evidence would indicate to a speaker at that time that /’att/, which had been the Aramaic form of the second person masculine singular pronoun from time immemorial, actually derives from Proto-Semitic **l’anta/*. If one does not wish to explain such frequent forms as hypercorrect extensions of true etymological spellings, one has to assume that the grapheme {n} originally points to a phonetic reality, that is, the nasalized pronunciation of long, or ‘geminate’, consonants. ‘Degemination’ by means of nasalization occurs in other languages, too (such as *koiné* Greek and Italian dialects in Southern Italy), but within Semitic, only the Babylonian branch of Akkadian has developed it with great regularity.³⁶ This view is further supported by the fact that among the Post-Achaemenid varieties of Aramaic, only Mandaic, which was spoken on the territory of former Babylonia, preserved more than occasional traces of the same phenomenon after the disappearance of the Persian chancellery (leaving aside Nabataean, which uninterruptedly continues Official Aramaic and whose status as a vernacular is debated, to say the least).³⁷

³⁴) Correctly emphasized by H.L. Ginsberg, ‘Aramaic Dialect Problems’, *AJSL* 50 (1933), pp. 1–9, here p. 8.

³⁵) Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, pp. 120–121, with bibliography. Cf. also the succinct and precise characterization in Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 28 (‘Dieses sogenannte Reichsaramäisch [...] beruht auf einer unbekannten aramäischen Schriftsprache Babylonien’).

³⁶) See the evidence discussed by J. Sanmartín, ‘Über Regeln und Ausnahmen. Verhalten des vorkonsonantischen /n/ im “Altsemitischen”’, in M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (eds.), *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag* (AOAT, 240; Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 1995), pp. 433–466.

³⁷) This fact does not receive sufficient attention in those attempts which see degemination

Together with the reduction of the gutturals and certain effects of Geers' law in Mandaic,³⁸ the nasalization of long consonants is thus most probably an effect of Akkadian substrate pronunciation. The degeminating spelling in Official Aramaic, then, furnishes strong linguistic evidence for positing a Babylonian origin of that Aramaic variety.

The assumption just outlined is not altogether new. However, it can be reinforced and fine-tuned by some further considerations which have hitherto featured less prominently in scholarship. A comparison of the Official Aramaic corpus with the material from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. reveals two interesting parallels with the so-called 'Assur Ostrakon' (KAI 233),³⁹ a political letter sent from Southern Babylonia to Assur around 650 B.C. or at least composed there by a Babylonian scribe. Contrary to every other Pre-Achaemenid witness of Aramaic, this text regularly uses the independent personal pronoun instead of the third person plural object suffix 'them' with verbs.⁴⁰ As was pointed out above, only the spread of the Achaemenid chancellery idiom turned the loss of the third person plural object suffixes into a regular trait of Aramaic as such. The Assur Ostrakon, by contrast, proves that it is no Official Aramaic innovation. If this feature was indeed restricted to Babylonia before the Persian Empire, one could make a case for the view that Official Aramaic, via the spoken dialect underlying it, and the language of the Assur Ostrakon have common roots in Babylonia.

In addition to that, the use of the 'adverbial' G-stem infinitive *l'mr* (that is, *l=mr*) /*l'mar*/ 'saying'⁴¹ as a marker introducing direct speech may count as another similarity supporting the same idea. S.E. Fassberg has recently pointed

(or 'prenasalization') as a productive sound change spreading from Official to Middle Aramaic, the most recent of which is W.R. Garr, 'Prenasalization in Aramaic', in C.L. Miller (ed.), *Studies in Semitic and Afroasiatic Linguistics Presented to Gene B. Gragg* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, 60; Chicago, Illinois: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), pp. 81–109 (with a serviceable survey of the material).

³⁸ Geers' law refers to the common phenomenon in Akkadian that a root can only contain at most one emphatic consonant. See already H.L. Ginsberg, 'Aramaic Dialect Problems II', *AJS* 52 (1936), pp. 95–103, here pp. 96–98, on the Akkadian influences on Mandaic.

³⁹ Edited with translation and grammatical notes by Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, pp. 19–21.

⁴⁰ There are at least nine certain instances (Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, p. 55); the allegedly suffixed form in line 17, *'klthm(w) wmr'y* 'a fire has devoured them and my lord [...]', may therefore result from haplography (so rightly *ibid.*, p. 20). Word spacing is inconsistent in this text and thus cannot be used as an argument against such an emendation of the material reading.

⁴¹ Cf. Gzella, *Tempus*, p. 294.

out in a comprehensive study of the infinitival forms in Aramaic that within the corpus of the Official Aramaic documents from Egypt, only the root *'mr* 'to say' has the archaic G-stem infinitive without the prefix *m-* /*ma-*/, but that this particular form also turns up in the Assur Ostrakon⁴² (lines 8 and 10, and, in a broken context, 17; another G-stem infinitive occurs in line 9: *q[r]q*, where it is part of a paronomastic construction: '[they fled] fleeing'). It is yet unattested in other Old Aramaic texts. The expected form *mmr* /*mēmar*/ also occurs in Official Aramaic, but a functional analysis demonstrates that it does not normally precede direct speech.⁴³ This subtle difference may prove relevant for the question at stake here: since G-stem infinitives without /*ma-*/ have disappeared from Official Aramaic in favour of the likewise old form with /*ma-*/, *l'mr* must be a morphological archaism pre-dating the Achaemenid period. Yet the fact that it occurs with an identical function in the Assur Ostrakon, but not in the rest of Old Aramaic, strongly suggests that its specific use is an innovation which originates in Babylonia and in all likelihood also entered Official Aramaic through its Babylonian predecessor.

It goes without saying, of course, that the evidence does not allow for a final decision, as no other Aramaic text from the seventh or sixth century B.C. where such a quotative marker would be expected has survived. The only possible exception is a legal document of unknown provenance, dated to 635 B.C.,⁴⁴ which features the enigmatic word *l'm* (line 5) before what appears to be a brief direct speech. Although the latter word has been compared to Syriac *lm* /*lam*/ (which often introduces references from Scripture) and even described as a by-form of *l'mr*,⁴⁵ its form and meaning are not clear enough as to state that it plays a role in the present discussion. Hence, the use of *l'mr* for introducing direct speech in Official Aramaic and the Assur Ostrakon is an appealing and possibly significant parallel, yet it must not count as an isogloss in the strict sense, because its statistical weight remains uncertain. Sweeping statements are inadequate given the paucity of Aramaic witnesses between the Sfire stela and

⁴² Fassberg, 'Infinitival forms', p. 244. The same connection has already been alluded to by Kutscher, 'Aramaic', p. 351 (under 'f)'), but thanks to recent discoveries like the Gozan inscription, the historical importance of the infinitive in Aramaic is now much more evident.

⁴³ With Ezra 5:11 being the sole exception, see Folmer, *Aramaic Language*, p. 755 (who explains this case as the result of a later redaction).

⁴⁴ Edited by Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ So S.A. Kaufman, 'An Assyro-Aramaic *egirtu ša šulmu*', in M. de Jong Ellis (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of J.J. Finkelstein* (Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 19; Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1977), pp. 119–127, here p. 121.

the Elephantine papyri, but the available facts seem to point into a certain direction without yielding a clear diagnostic trait.

Nonetheless, these two language varieties are manifestly not identical, since the Assur Ostrakon does not contain any instance of degemination which is so frequent in Official Aramaic (see *ʾt* / *ʾatt* / ‘you’ in lines 2 and 19). Whether this simply results from the chronological gap between the letter discovered at Assur and the first datable witness of Official Aramaic or implies different, coexisting, Aramaic languages in Babylonia already in the seventh century B.C., cannot be said with confidence. Several Aramaic words in cuneiform texts from Babylonia and Aramaic elements in Babylonian personal names, by contrast, even when they occur in Assyrian texts, do have degemination.⁴⁶ Other examples from the very same set of data lack this feature, so the evidence may indicate a situation where degemination was still gradually permeating into Aramaic. Indeed, it never became fully regular there, perhaps because the phonological system as such resisted it. Texts from Tell Halaf in North Eastern Syria also exhibit this inconsistency.⁴⁷ From the same vantage point, the discrepancy between Official Aramaic and the Assur Ostrakon does not quite come as a surprise. Rather, seventh-century Babylonia would be the time and place when and where the language that was to become the official idiom of the Achaemenids was slowly taking shape.

A second important dissimilarity bears even less on the issue to be discussed: both types of Aramaic also use different forms for the historical present in order to vividly represent a past event,⁴⁸ namely the ‘long imperfect’ in the Assur Ostrakon (line 16: *mn šnh yqrqn wyks’n hmw* / *mēn θ/anā yağroqūn wa-yeḫsawn hōmū* / ‘from here they [i.e., the prisoners] fled, and they pursued them’) and the participle as a narrative tense in Official Aramaic (that is, Dan 3:3–7; 26–27; 4:3–5; 5:5–10). Here, discovering the reason proves less difficult, since the verbalization of the Aramaic participle as, initially, a present tense, and thus also as a *praesens historicum*, was only in its embryonic stage when the Assur Ostrakon was written. Later on, by contrast, it would have been on its way to become the default form for the same purpose. Consequently, the use of the ‘long imperfect’ there and the participle in the Book of Daniel reflects two

⁴⁶ Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 92, gives a survey of the material.

⁴⁷ References in K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), p. 49.

⁴⁸ See H. Gzella, ‘Erscheinungsformen des historischen Präsens im Aramäischen’, *Or* 74 (2005), pp. 399–408.

different phases in the history of Aramaic rather than two regionally or socially distinct varieties. This feature thus cannot be adduced in order to disprove a possible, and indeed plausible, link between the predecessor of Official Aramaic and the kind of Aramaic reflected by the Assur Ostrakon. Such a link, then, remains the most likely explanation of the data surveyed.

After Official Aramaic has been traced back to its Babylonian origins as far as the evidence currently available allows, Eastern Aramaic, too, must be individuated as a proper branch of Aramaic before any instance of mutual interaction between the two can be studied. Proceeding from the same methodological principles as employed before, one can easily identify a number of characteristic traits. They have diagnostic value and can be found regularly in the earliest epigraphic corpora after the Persian period at the very latest, but for the major part defy a strictly historical explanation:

1. The most distinctive hallmark is the ending of the emphatic state masculine plural, for which Eastern Aramaic consistently has /-ē/ instead of older Aramaic /-ayyā/. It acts as the default form not only in Syriac (with a few exceptions), Babylonian Aramaic, and Mandaic, but, according to the consonantal spelling (ⲉ), whereas /-ayyā/ would be spelled {yʾ}), also in earlier epigraphic corpora like Hatran Aramaic and Old Syriac. Since /-ē/ (an open /ē/) cannot be explained as a contracted form of /-ayyā/ on phonetic grounds (a contraction of */ay/ would yield /ē/, that is, a closed /ē/,⁴⁹ and geminate glides like /-yy-/ do not contract in Aramaic), scholars usually assume that this ending is loan from Assyrian.⁵⁰
2. Further, Eastern Aramaic varieties generally have a preformative /n-/ or /l-/ instead of older /y-/ for third person ‘imperfect’ forms (see the discussion below). The reasons for this change are elusive, but its workings can be clearly observed in all Aramaic languages whose ‘Eastern’ character is uncontested.
3. In addition to that, many representatives of Eastern Aramaic regularly expand the etymological demonstrative pronouns based on Common Semitic */δ/ (which later became /d/ in Aramaic) by prefixing other deictic elements, most notably /hā-/.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Both can be clearly distinguished on the basis of later vocalization traditions, since original /ē/ became /ī/ in Jacobite (Western Syriac), whereas /ē/ remained.

⁵⁰ So, among many others, Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung*, pp. 139–104; Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, pp. 127–128; Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte II*, p. 50.

⁵¹ See G.W. Nebe, ‘Zu den Bausteinen der deiktischen Pronomina im babylonisch-talmudischen Aramäischen’ in R. Reichman (ed.), *‘Der Odem des Menschen ist eine Leuchte*

4. Lastly, the Eastern Aramaic lexicon contains some characteristic by-forms of Common Semitic roots and words. Particularly noteworthy are $\sqrt{z}dq$ instead of $\sqrt{s}dq$, ‘to be rightful, just’, and $\text{ṭwl} / \text{ṭql(l)} /$ instead of $/\text{ṭel(l)} /$, ‘shadow’, as well as its derivatives.⁵² They occur in Palmyrene Aramaic, Hatran, Syriac, and Mandaic. Neither, to be sure, results from a regular sound change, and their origin remains unclear. One might think of variants in pronunciation, which is of course most sensitive to regional differences.

Of these characteristic traits, only the ending $/-\bar{e}/$ for the emphatic state masculine plural can be traced back to the seventh century B.C., which also was, as shown above, the formative period of the language that later became Official Aramaic. Perhaps it first replaced the hitherto unattested original *nisbe* plural forms for euphonic reasons (hence $/yahūdāy-\bar{e}/$ ‘the Judaeans’ instead of the cumbersome $**/yahūdāyayyā/$).⁵³ From the Neo-Assyrian period onwards, however, it regularly appears in Aramaic place names attested in cuneiform writing, e.g., *til-le-e* /*tellē*/ ‘the tells’.⁵⁴ The two occurrences of *mm* ‘peoples’ in the Proverbs of Ahiqar (lines 94 and 162) furthermore show that this ending was not restricted to gentilics and place names, but that it also affected regular nouns: the double grapheme {m} proves that the word in question is a plural form, so the vowel letter {ʿ} must indicate the vowel $/\bar{e}/$ instead of the emphatic masculine singular $/-\bar{ā}/$. Linguistic criteria demonstrate that the Proverbs of Ahiqar, even though they have been preserved on a papyrus from Elephantine dating to Achaemenid times,⁵⁵ belong to an earlier stage of Aramaic. Only later they have been combined with an Official Aramaic framework story, which naturally has $/-ayyā/$ for the emphatic masculine plural, into one text. Hence, the literary language of the Proverbs, whatever its provenance may have been,⁵⁶ exhibits what perhaps only later became a distinctive feature of Eastern Aramaic as it is known from Hellenistic and Roman times onwards.

des Herrn.’ *Gedenkschrift Aharon Agus* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), pp. 251–273, for a comprehensive discussion.

⁵² Cf. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 98.

⁵³ Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, pp. 127–128.

⁵⁴ Numerous references can be found in Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte II*, p. 50.

⁵⁵ This is evidenced by its use as a palimpsest whose original stratum contains a datable tax account.

⁵⁶ I. Kottsieper, ‘Die Geschichte und die Sprüche des weisen Ahiqar’, in *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, III/2. *Weisheitstexte II* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1991), pp. 320–347, here pp. 320–324, for instance, opts for Southern Syria because of alleged Canaanisms and the absence of Akkadian features; Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte II*, p. 50, rather thinks of

This feature was then eclipsed by the Official Aramaic standard language during the Achaemenid period, but reappeared once Official Aramaic began to weaken: an incantation text from Uruk in cuneiform script which, for linguistic reasons, has mostly been dated between ca. 200 and 150 B.C. (according to palaeographic criteria, it could be older, but the exact date is irrelevant to the present argument), uses this ending as the default form (see the various examples from lines 11–13 and 36–38, several of which are uncontested: *ra-ab-ra-bé-e* ‘the adults’; *dar-da-qé-e* ‘the children’; *n[é-š]e-e* ‘the women’; *ga-[a]b-re-e* ‘the men’).⁵⁷ In Palmyrene Aramaic, which combines Official Aramaic and Eastern Aramaic features, the same ending also occurs side by side with older */-ayyā/*. The latter has perhaps been inherited from Official Aramaic, but both are functionally equivalent.⁵⁸ It seems that, once Achaemenid power had diminished, this ancient Eastern ending came back to the surface in texts outside a firm spelling tradition, like the Uruk incantation, or merged with the remnants of the old standard language. The latter point will receive some more attention further down. Old Syriac, i.e., the language of the Pre-Christian inscriptions from Edessa, as well as the Aramaic texts from Assur, Hatra, and its surroundings, consistently have */-ē/*. This is hardly surprising, since they generally are more innovative than Palmyrene Aramaic.⁵⁹ A tentative explanation could proceed from the hypothesis that there was a greater effort

Western Mesopotamia-Palmyra; S. Parpola, ‘Il retroterra assiro di Ahiqar’, in R. Contini and C. Grottanelli (eds.), *Il saggio Ahiqar: Fortuna e trasformazioni di uno scritto sapienziale. Il testo più antico e le sue versioni* (Studi biblici, 148; Brescia: Paideia, 2005), pp. 91–112, seeks the origin of the Proverbs of Ahiqar in Assyria.

⁵⁷ The cuneiform text has been edited afresh by M.J. Geller, ‘The Aramaic Incantation in Cuneiform Script (AO 6489 = TCL 6,58)’, *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 35–36 (1997–2000), pp. 127–145. For a reconstruction of the Aramaic pronunciation, see Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte II*, pp. 26–27. Other alleged examples may in fact rather be suffixed forms: *ka-niš-a-a-’i[-i]* ‘its assembled ones’ meaning ‘those assembled on it [i.e., the street]’; *ia-a-ti-ib-a-a-’i-i* ‘its sitting ones’, that is, ‘those sitting by it [i.e., the city-gate]’. The meaning of *ru-ga-za-a-’i-’i*, either ‘the outraged ones’ or ‘his dress of wrath’ (Beyer), is also controversial.

⁵⁸ This is well known. The relevant examples have conveniently been assembled once again by W.R. Garr, ‘The Determined Plural Ending *-ē* in Targum Onqelos’, in Gzella and Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, pp. 173–206, here pp. 175–176.

⁵⁹ See H. Gzella, ‘Late Imperial Aramaic’, forthcoming in M.P. Streck and S. Weninger (eds.), *Semitic Languages: An International Handbook* (HSK; Berlin: De Gruyter), for an evaluation of the evidence; further *idem*, ‘Aramaic in the Parthian Period: The Arsacid Inscriptions’, in Gzella and Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, pp. 107–130, here pp. 109–112.

in Eastern Mesopotamia to ‘downgrade’ Greek influence than in a place so strongly Hellenized as Palmyra.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Eastern Aramaic languages replace /y-/ as the inherited, Common Semitic preformative of the ‘imperfect’ with either /n-/ , like Syriac shortly before 200 A.D.⁶¹ and Mandaic, or /l-/ , like Hatran Aramaic throughout, the major part of which dates from the first and second centuries A.D., and Jewish Babylonian by ca. 200 A.D. The change in Syriac is documented in the epigraphic corpus and literally takes place before the observer’s eyes; in Jewish Babylonian, it had already occurred in the only witness from this time, a badly damaged papyrus from Dura Europos using square script (P. Dura 151:9). Although no instance of a regular ‘imperfect’ preformative other than /y-/ is attested in older Aramaic material, the use of /l-/ presumably has grown out of the ‘asseverative’ particle *l* /la-/ with the ‘imperfect’.⁶² This latter form is already attested in the ninth-century Gozan inscription. The feature in question as a regular change, whatever its reason might be,⁶³ is thus new, but it builds on elements which have long been part of the language.

⁶⁰ So most recently J.F. Healey, ‘Variety in Early Syriac: The Context in Contemporary Aramaic’, in Gzella and Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, pp. 221–229, here p. 225; similarly already K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Inschriften aus Assur, Hatra und dem übrigen Ostmesopotamien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), p. 7.

⁶¹ See the evidence in Healey, ‘Variety’, pp. 225–226.

⁶² Cf. already H. Bauer, ‘Semitische Sprachprobleme’ (5–7), *ZDMG* 69 (1915), pp. 561–563, here p. 563 n. 1; further, Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, pp. 124–126; Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 98.

⁶³ It has recently been suggested by A.D. Rubin, ‘On the Third Person Preformative *n-* / *l-* in Aramaic, and an Ethiopic Parallel’, *ANES* 44 (2007), pp. 1–28 (most of which is a learned summary of all kinds of scholarly opinions on this topic), that the replacement of /y-/ with another consonant was triggered after the change of a vowelless word-initial glide to a glottal stop in Syriac (e.g., *ʾyḏ* / (ʿ)idā/ ‘hand’ instead of what before the loss of short unstressed vowels in open syllables was *yḏ* / yaḏā/ [and subsequently became /yḏā/]), at least in writing, rendered third-person singular forms indistinguishable from the first person singular whose preformative of course always began with /ʾ/. This explanation is impossible: the said glottal stop only acts as a graphic device to indicate that a certain word begins with a vowel, i.e., the vocalic realization of the glide /y/ as [i] when immediately followed by another consonant. However, the use of such a spelling convention does not occur before Classical Syriac and other later Eastern forms like Babylonian Jewish Aramaic and Mandaic (cf. Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’, p. 634). In the whole of Aramaic from Hatra and its surroundings, as well as in the Pre-Christian Syriac inscriptions after 200 A.D., the change of the preformative to /n-/ or /l-/ had already been completed, while words beginning with a vowelless glide were still written without the sign for the glottal stop in the same corpora.

The expansion of the demonstrative pronouns by the deictic element /hā-/ constitutes an even clearer departure from earlier Aramaic, be it in the West or in the East. Their origin, however, is still unknown.⁶⁴ Neither can the typically ‘Eastern’ lexemes like $\sqrt{zdq}$ and $\text{ṭwl} / \text{ṭol(l)}$ be confidently traced back to Pre-Achaemenid times.⁶⁵ *Mutatis mutandis*, this also applies to a number of later developments which turn up particularly often in Post-Achaemenid Eastern texts without being strictly confined to them, like the younger by-form of the third masculine singular suffix with plural nouns /-ayh/ < */-ayhī/ ‘his’ instead of older /-awh(i)/⁶⁶ and /d(a)-/ for the old relative marker */dī/, perhaps via */dī/.⁶⁷ The combination of the participle with an enclitic form of a personal pronoun became likewise frequent in Eastern Aramaic as a present and future tense,⁶⁸ but it does not occur in the earliest relevant texts. Neither can the loss of the determinative force of the emphatic state be traced in these corpora, even though it acquired the status of a characteristic trait of later Eastern Aramaic.⁶⁹ Lastly, the disappearance of the ‘energetic’ ending before suffixes attached to the former ‘long imperfect’⁷⁰ might in theory be a shared retention rather than a

Compare, e.g., yḏ' /yda' ‘he knew’ (< /yada'/) in H 291:1 (Beyer, *Inschriften*, p. 84) or in P 2:26 (H.J.W. Drijvers and J.F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa & Osroene* [HdO, I/42; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999], p. 239), both written with the grapheme {y}. The use of the grapheme {y} appears but several centuries later. Consequently, it cannot be related to the change of the preformative.

⁶⁴ One such instance has been suggested for the eighth-century Bukan-inscription from Lake Urmia by G.W. Nebe, ‘Bemerkung zur alt-aramäischen Inschrift aus Bukān’, *MLR* 15 (2003–2004), pp. 181–183, but it is derived from conjecture alone.

⁶⁵ On 'l /'al/ in the Gozan inscription (lines 14–15) and the Uruk text, see Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 98.

⁶⁶ See Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’, pp. 615–618; Gzella, ‘Arsacid Inscriptions’, p. 115. The /y/ is supposedly due to paradigm pressure.

⁶⁷ Cf. Gzella, ‘Late Imperial Aramaic’.

⁶⁸ As pointed out by M.J. Geller, ‘Philology versus linguistics and Aramaic phonology’, *BSOAS* 69 (2006), pp. 79–89, here pp. 84–85.

⁶⁹ Thus H.L. Ginsberg, ‘Aramaic Studies Today’, *JAOS* 62 (1942), pp. 229–238, here p. 234, n. 26 (following Rosenthal), accepted by Kutscher, ‘Aramaic’, p. 361, and Boyarin, ‘Inquiry’, pp. 614–615, in their lists of four Eastern characteristics. The first two, i.e., the preformative of the ‘imperfect’ and the emphatic state ending /-ē/ are, as has been demonstrated, unproblematic. On the fourth criterion, see the subsequent remark. Kutscher also adds the *qtīl li*-construction as an Eastern feature inherited from Official Aramaic, on which see above. This construction could perhaps distinguish Eastern from Western varieties of Aramaic, but it does not single out Eastern Aramaic as opposed to Official Aramaic.

⁷⁰ Included by Ginsberg (first, as it seems, in ‘Dialect Problems II’, p. 103) and subsequently also by Kutscher and by Boyarin in their elenchus of Eastern traits, see the preceding note.

common Eastern hallmark, because it reflects normal Semitic usage in the light of, e.g., Classical Arabic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Ugaritic and others. Hence, the increasing use of the ‘energetic’ with suffixes at the expense of the normal ‘long imperfect’ seems to be an innovation (which later became dominant in the West) originating with third person masculine singular pronouns quite early in the attested history of Aramaic.⁷¹ The fact that it restores, at least with suffixed forms, the morphological opposition between the old ‘long imperfect’ and the ‘short imperfect’ (or ‘jussive’) waning in the course of time both in the East and in the West, might have supported a further spread of this phenomenon. Non-‘energetic’ verbal forms carrying object suffixes, by contrast, could therefore be interpreted as an older usage coming to the surface again when Achaemenid Aramaic began to lose its vital power. Alternatively, these forms might also be viewed as remainders of the old jussive,⁷² but then one would have to explain how such a moribund category could become fully productive again, even if it was protected with the object suffixes. This matter certainly deserves some further investigation; at present, however, the diagnostic value of suffixed verbal forms must be left open.

All in all, then, individual features which later became characteristic traits of Eastern Aramaic can already be observed in textual material from the seventh century B.C. and perhaps even earlier. In spite of this, linguistic classification must proceed from clusters of isoglosses, not from isolated elements. While there clearly is a current of Aramaic which consistently has the plural ending /-ē/ at least from Neo-Assyrian times onwards, the dialectal distinction of a ‘Western’ and an ‘Eastern’ branch does not make sense for the Pre-Achaemenid period in the same way as it does for the Post-Achaemenid period. Hence, a less schematic approach might do more justice to the diversity of Aramaic before Alexander’s conquest. As a provisional working hypothesis, one should perhaps consider certain currents of Aramaic as ‘Eastern Aramaic before it became Eastern Aramaic’ or ‘Eastern Aramaic in the make’. This also allows for the necessary flexibility to accommodate new data.

How does Official Aramaic fit into a framework like the one just described? Although it evidently comes from the East and presumably shares isoglosses with the Babylonian variety of Aramaic attested in the Assur Ostrakon, it lacks all distinctive and significant Eastern traits previously outlined. Hence,

Pace Ginsberg, it can hardly be attributed to Akkadian influence (so rightly Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, p. 127).

⁷¹) Cf. the evidence presented by Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik*, pp. 79–80.

⁷²) Kaufman, *Akkadian Influences*, pp. 126–127.

it cannot be assigned to the Eastern Aramaic group which only becomes identifiable from the Hellenistic period onwards.⁷³ A specific form which could be connected to Eastern Aramaic proper is the C-stem ‘perfect’ of the root $\sqrt{y\bar{t}b}$ ‘to be good’ with a /w/,⁷⁴ i.e., /hawṭēb-/ in a legal text from Elephantine (Cowley 6:11, second person singular: *whyṭbt* ‘and you have satisfied’), as opposed to /hayṭēb-/ in the Bar-rāḳib inscription from Zincirli (KAI 216:12, first person singular with third person singular suffix: *whyṭbth* ‘and I made it [sc. the house of my father] more beautiful’). Another exception might be the supposed form of the root *zḏq* in one of the Aśoka-inscriptions (5:1, third century B.C.). However, the parallel versions of these edicts issued by an Indian king emerge from a largely unknown linguistic situation and may rather reflect the attempt to compose texts with an Official Aramaic flair than count as a genuine witness of that language.⁷⁵ As a consequence, they have to be treated with due caution. For the time being, it cannot be decided whether that particular grammatical form results from Eastern Aramaic influence or has an entirely different origin. Isolated examples like these, to be sure, have no impact on classification, at least not on their own. The same goes for the absence of the direct object marker *yṭ* /yāt/ in Official Aramaic. This particle regularly occurs in later Western Aramaic⁷⁶ and already in the inscriptions from Sfire, but its lack does not make Official Aramaic an Eastern (*qua* non-Western) variety. Instead, Official Aramaic does not simply fit the general distinction of a Western and an Eastern branch of Aramaic according to the standards of a later period: although its Babylonian origin can still be observed, it acts as a de-regionalized standard language, a *koiné*.

Now that the arguments for keeping Eastern Aramaic and Official Aramaic apart have been marshalled, the mutual interaction of both varieties can be

⁷³ Greenfield’s hypothesis that ‘Official Aramaic can be classified as Eastern Aramaic’ (‘Dialects’, p. 99) is not further substantiated, except for a general reference to ‘Akkadian loanwords [...] as well as other indications of Eastern Aramaic’ in the Ahiqar framework story (*ibid.*, p. 97). Similarly Kutscher, ‘Aramaic’, p. 361, who nonetheless makes clear that he does not refer to linguistic criteria, but to content, historical context, and literary *Lokalkolorit*, and already Ginsberg, ‘Dialect Problems’, p. 8 (the linguistic argument supplied in *idem*, ‘Dialect Problems II’, is extremely doubtful). According to the stricter definition of both ‘Official Aramaic’ and ‘Eastern Aramaic’ attempted here, instead of a generic idea of ‘Easternness’, such a conclusion seems of course far from obvious.

⁷⁴ Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte I*, p. 29 (‘in ostaramäischer Weise’).

⁷⁵ See Gzella, *Tempus*, pp. 39–41.

⁷⁶ Gzella, ‘Late Imperial Aramaic’. The very few instances in Palmyrene Aramaic and Syriac do not support any association of these varieties with Western Aramaic.

studied with greater precision. It has been demonstrated that within the Official Aramaic corpus, the major part of which was found in Egypt, hardly any distinctively Eastern features can be detected. Linguistic interaction during the Achaemenid period thus by and large means that Official Aramaic spelling conventions and style, backed by the power of an imperial language, encroached on existing Aramaic dialects. The Hermopolis letters from Egypt, which on linguistic grounds are clearly distinct from Achaemenid Official Aramaic,⁷⁷ provide an interesting case in point: they reflect an Aramaic variety that had presumably arrived in Egypt before the Persians, but slowly began to exhibit typical Achaemenid spellings. In the course of time, Persian administration in Egypt became firmly rooted, and the language variety attested by the Hermopolis letters disappeared. The Bauer-Meissner papyrus supports this hypothesis. Similar scenarios will no doubt have arisen elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, too.

When a new linguistic situation arose after Alexander, the old chancellery language proved that it was strong enough to outlive its empire for some time. Long-established practices and traditions kept old-fashioned legal formulae in use even under the Roman Empire, as is confirmed by Jewish Palestinian as well as Nabataean documentary texts from the Dead Sea region and elsewhere.⁷⁸ What is more, a number of former local Aramaic dialects consciously seem to have adopted Achaemenid spellings once they became written languages from around the second century B.C. onwards and acquired writing systems on their own based on the Achaemenid ductus.⁷⁹ Those varieties attested in Syria and Mesopotamia belong to the Eastern Aramaic branch which, thanks to much more direct evidence, can now better be distinguished from the Western idioms used in Palestine and Samaria. In the West up to Palmyra (excepting Nabataean which continued Official Aramaic almost uninterruptedly), there seems to have been a more gradual transformation of the outskirts of Official Aramaic in contact with local idioms. But even the quite innovative Eastern Aramaic dialects appear to have consciously adopted Achaemenid orthography in a few cases when they rose to administrative languages themselves. These

⁷⁷ Cf. Gzella, 'Imperial Aramaic', for a synopsis of various peculiar features.

⁷⁸ H.M. Cotton, 'Language Gaps in Roman Palestine and the Roman Near East', in C. Frevel (ed.), *Medien im antiken Palästina* (FAT, II/10; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), pp. 159–178.

⁷⁹ Cf. H. Gzella, 'Das Aramäische in den römischen Ostprovinzen: Sprachsituationen in Arabien, Syrien und Mesopotamien zur Kaiserzeit', *BO* 63 (2006), pp. 15–39, for a summary of this process and a survey of the evidence.

features include non-assimilated /n/ in a few cases and *bṛt* for the construct state feminine singular of the word ‘daughter’, according to personal names now supposedly pronounced /bat/, and, at least in Old Syriac, {š} for */š/.⁸⁰

An attempt to assert non-Greek identity may have been the motive underlying this renaissance of traditional spelling. Indeed, the various reactions to the recent reform of normative orthography in Germany do remind one that spelling can act as a very vital marker of cultural self-awareness. Judging from the reasonably low degree of variation in the epigraphic corpora, orthography was standardized at a relatively early stage in all of these city-states in Roman Syria and Mesopotamia, be it Edessa, Hatra, or Assur. In the case of Classical Syriac, the respective features of Achaemenid spelling became part of a living literary tradition for more than a thousand years and revived thereafter. A significant instance of Official Aramaic heritage in later Eastern Aramaic is also the *qṭīl lī*-construction, although it still remained restricted to certain verbs like ‘to hear’, ‘to know’ etc. (The fact that it does not turn up in the earlier epigraphic corpora may be purely due to coincidence, though.) Varieties more exposed to continuous contact with Iranian languages like Kurdish, however, greatly expanded that construction and eventually even made it the backbone of their verbal system.⁸¹ Ongoing work on the modern Aramaic languages of that area will no doubt contribute insights which will also prove valuable for a more precise idea of the linguistic situation in Late Antiquity. It has to be borne in mind that many spoken vernaculars have disappeared from the record, but might have left some traces in considerably later forms of Aramaic.

Identifying plausible models for how this heritage was transmitted to scribal cultures emerging centuries after the fall of the Persian Empire would be a rewarding task for future research. A pioneering attempt has been made by J.C. Greenfield.⁸² Greenfield proposed a common literary language existing besides Official, or Imperial, Aramaic, whereas the latter, in his view, was confined to administrative purposes. His theory has been accepted by a number of scholars, but the problem is that this ‘Standard Literary Aramaic’ never has been defined precisely, neither in its own right nor in relationship to Official

⁸⁰ See Gzella, ‘Late Imperial Aramaic’ for a general outline. K. Beyer, ‘Der reichsaramäische Einschlag in der ältesten syrischen Literatur’, *ZDMG* 116 (1966), pp. 242–254, has some further examples from the earliest Syriac texts.

⁸¹ Cf. Khan, ‘Aramaic and the Impact of Languages in Contact’.

⁸² J.C. Greenfield, ‘Standard Literary Aramaic’, in A. Caquot and D. Cohen (eds.), *Actes du premier congrès international de linguistique sémitique et chamito-sémitique* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), pp. 280–289, especially pp. 284–289.

Aramaic.⁸³ Another approach, informed by sociolinguistic forms of thought, would explain the preservation of certain Official Aramaic features as a result of its unbroken prestige, supported by a continuous scribal tradition, in the struggle of competing linguistic varieties outliving the rise and fall of empires. In many regions, Achaemenid Aramaic would be the written standard most readily available. This calls for an investigation into the ways and institutions by which knowledge of the traditional prestige language could survive and what exactly the roots of the new written idioms are. In order to achieve progress along such lines, linguistic and social history would have to go hand in hand. Musing about issues like these, one dearly feels the lack of a comprehensive cultural history of Aramaic in Antiquity.

⁸³) Besides the general remark that it was the 'literary style of Official Aramaic which would, in the course of time, become Standard Literary Aramaic' (Greenfield, 'Dialects', p. 97).

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